

LCQ9: Occupational safety

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Lo Wai-kiok and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kiok, in the Legislative Council today (January 19):

Question:

It is learnt that Hong Kong had about 20 fatal industrial accidents every year in recent years, and the number last year was even as high as 25. Late last year alone, a few industrial accidents involving sewer manholes caused the death of three workers. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the staffing establishment of the Labour Department (LD) for conducting inspections on construction sites to ensure occupational safety, and the number of inspections conducted, in each of the past three years; whether it will allocate additional resources to the LD for stepping up inspection work; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether it will review the legislation related to occupational safety and health (OSH) as soon as possible, so as to (i) ensure the provision of sufficient safety equipment for workers, (ii) improve the code of practice for safe working, and (iii) increase the penalties for offenders; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) whether it will step up publicity and education efforts on OSH, so as to further enhance the safety awareness of employers and employees, thereby avoiding the recurrence of tragic industrial accidents; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

In the past 10 years, the industrial accident rate per 1 000 workers of Hong Kong dropped from 23.6 in 2011 to 12.4 in 2020 and the overall occupational safety and health (OSH) performance has improved considerably. However, the number of industrial fatalities in recent years has been hovering at around 20 cases every year with no sign of falling. The situation is unsatisfactory.

The Labour Department (LD) has been closely monitoring the OSH risks of various industries and their changes. Pursuant to the risk-based principle and targeting particularly at those industries and work processes carrying relatively higher risks, the LD has been formulating and adjusting the inspection and enforcement, publicity and promotion, as well as education and training strategies in a timely manner.

The number of fatal industrial accidents and the industrial accident rate per 1 000 workers of the construction industry have been the highest amongst all industries. The LD has therefore been attaching great importance to and striving to improve the OSH performance of the construction industry through implementing targeted measures.

My reply to the question raised by the Member is as follows:

(1) Occupational Safety Officers and Occupational Hygienists of the Operations Divisions of the LD are responsible for conducting OSH inspections at workplaces. The establishment of the Operations Divisions for the past three years is as follows:

â€‹

	2019	2020	2021
Occupational Safety Officer	369	366	â€‹376
Occupational Hygienist	20	22	22

As officers of the Operations Divisions are responsible for inspecting different types of workplaces throughout the territory, the manpower involved in conducting construction site inspections cannot be separately accounted for. In 2019, 2020 and 2021, the Operations Divisions of the Occupational Safety Division conducted 87 668, 58 035 and 71 063 inspections of construction sites respectively, accounting for more than half of the total number of inspections. Due to COVID-19 pandemic, the number of inspections in 2020 was significantly lower than that of 2019. However, as the pandemic situation was more contained in 2021, inspections work was actively resumed in 2021, with the total number of inspections last year drawing close to the level in 2019.

The LD has been adjusting the inspection and enforcement strategies, and deploying necessary manpower in a timely manner in response to the changing risk situation of the construction industry, such as launching special enforcement operations targeting at different types of high-risk work from time to time, conducting comprehensive and in-depth surprise inspections targeting at sites with poor OSH performance as well as conducting area patrols targeting small-scale renovation and maintenance works, etc. The LD will continue to ensure there is sufficient manpower to carry out the inspection work through internal staff deployment and seeking additional resources where necessary.

(2) In light of changes in OSH risks, the LD from time to time reviews and where necessary amends OSH legislation and OSH codes of practice/guidelines to ensure that the regulatory regime keeps pace with the times. For example, the LD has recently revised the OSH guidelines in relation to scaffolding work and work near rooftop. In light of the recent manhole accidents, the LD is also arranging to meet with relevant stakeholders to explore further enhancement of guidelines on work in confined spaces.

As regards legislation, the LD is planning to introduce an amendment bill on OSH legislation within the current term Government to increase the penalties of the OSH offences with a view to strengthening their deterrent effect and further safeguarding workers' OSH. In addition, the LD is also planning to amend the relevant OSH regulation to expand the scope of the construction work notification mechanism to cover minor construction works with relatively higher risks. This will enable the LD to better grasp the risk situation and take timely actions.

(3) In respect of publicity and education, the LD has been closely monitoring the changes of OSH risk levels of various industries and processes and disseminating OSH messages to different targets through various channels in a timely manner. The LD also, in collaboration with the Occupational Safety and Health Council, trade associations, workers' unions and other organisations, co-organises different promotional activities, including seminars, talks, sponsorship schemes, large scale OSH award schemes and award presentation ceremonies.

With a view to further enhancing the OSH awareness of the construction industry, the LD has recently stepped up targeted publicity and promotion work. This includes disseminating messages about safety of work-at-height and work-above-ground through the websites and mobile applications frequently visited by construction workers, broadcasting radio announcements by celebrities on race days, sponsoring workers' unions and related organisations to organise talks at construction sites, etc. In addition, the LD has recently finished the production of a new series of TV and Radio Announcements in the Public Interest to remind workers not to take above-ground work that may look simple lightly. The LD will continue to make use of various publicity and promotion platforms and channels with a view to disseminating OSH messages to different stakeholders more effectively.